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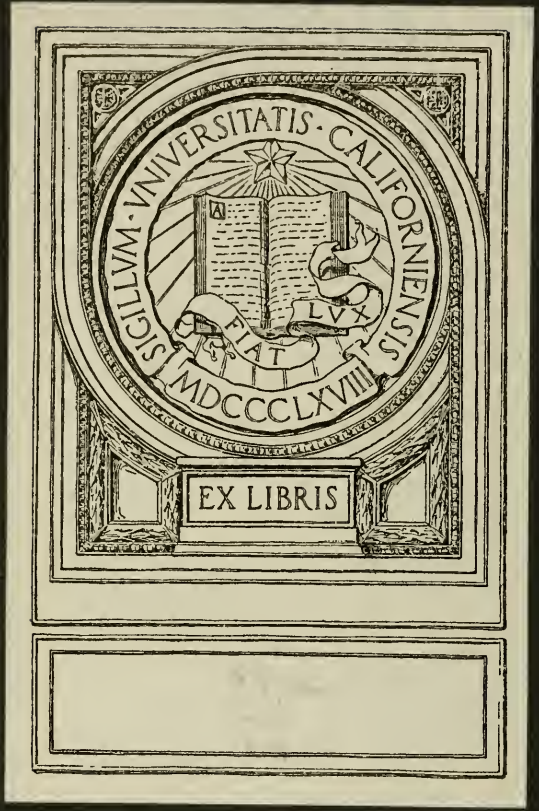
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PAPERS FOR WAR TIME. No. 9

The Witness of the Church in the Present Crisis

By X

Price Twopence

HUMPHREY MILFORD
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
LONDON EDINBURGH GLASGOW NEW YORK
TORONTO MELBOURNE BOMBAY

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EXPLANATORY NOTE

Great Britain is engaged in a war from which, as we believe, there was offered to our nation no honourable way of escape. The desire of all who love their country is to serve it in the hour of its need, and so to live and labour that those who have fallen in its service may not have died in vain. While this may suffice to make immediate duty clear, the war remains in the deepest sense a challenge to Christian thought. The present bitter struggle between nations which for centuries have borne the Christian name, indicates some deep-seated failure to understand the principles of Christ and to apply them to human affairs.

This series of papers embodies an attempt to reach, by common thought, discussion, and prayer, a truer understanding of the meaning of Christianity and of the mission of the Church to the individual, to society, and to the world.

Those who are promoting the issue of these papers are drawn from different political parties and different Christian bodies. They believe that the truth they seek can be attained only by providing for a measure of diversity in expression. Therefore they do not accept responsibility for the opinions of any paper taken alone. But in spirit they are united, for they are one in the conviction that in Christ and in His Gospel lies the hope of redemption and health for society and for national life.

THE WITNESS OF THE CHURCH IN THE PRESENT CRISIS

I

The object of this paper is to plead for earnest consideration of the attitude and witness of the Church of Christ in the present crisis. The question is not one that can be set aside for a more convenient season. For the Church, no less truly than the nation, is on its trial. We know to-day as we never knew before what our country means to us and what price we are ready to pay for its preservation. But to the Church we are bound by a yet stronger loyalty. The future of the Church of Christ is a matter of deeper concern to the world than the future of the British Empire. And therefore, even in our absorption in the struggle for our national existence, we must ask how the Church is meeting the test of this crisis, when all things are being proved, and only that which is real can survive.

It is true that no outside hostile power threatens at this moment to crush the Church out of existence. But there are other dangers no less real and formidable. There have been Great Powers whose strength has gone from them, though they have not suffered defeat in open battle. They have sunk into decay and insignificance, disregarded and negligible in the counsels of the nations, a mere shadow and memory of their former greatness, simply because they have lacked the insight, resolution, and vitality to meet the tests and emergencies of life. Is it certain that the Church has no cause to fear a similar fate ?

The war has shown conclusively that the Church does not exercise a commanding influence in the modern world. No catastrophe was necessary to bring home a fact that

has long been obvious. The Church has failed to lead civilization, and has taken a subordinate position within it. Such a state of matters should have been intolerable. But since the Church too readily accepted the position, it is well that it should be compelled in a moment of vivid insight to recognize the full measure of its humiliation. Whatever faith we may have in the ideal, the Church in its concrete embodiment in institutional forms clearly occupies a secondary place in the thoughts and affections of men. When the test came, Christians everywhere found that national loyalty was a more powerful force than the bonds which united them with Christians in hostile countries. If the universal Church had been a living idea in the minds of men, swaying their imaginations and claiming their first allegiance, there could have been no war.

But if out of our shame and sorrow is born the resolve to strive by the grace of God in an altogether new way to realize on earth a Holy Catholic Church which, seeking first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and confessing in all its practice that those who are in Christ are brethren, can claim to speak with moral authority, the beginning must be made now. The goal is far distant. Infinite patience and labour will be needed to heal the divisions of the Church and to wrestle anew in the light of modern knowledge with the great problems of faith and order. But if the Church is to regain its moral authority over the minds of men, the opportunity is now. Life has become unexpectedly real. It has been intensified and heightened through the calling forth of superhuman energies. Good and evil have become more sharply opposed and can be seen with unwonted clearness. In an hour of exaltation and new insight men are prepared to pour out lavishly the precious possessions which in ordinary times it is their main concern to preserve and protect. The world is passing through such agony and

travail as it has not known for generations. If in a time like this the Church has no authentic and prophetic message from God to deliver, what good purpose has it to serve in the world ?

In the minds of many of the most earnest and thoughtful Christian people there is a feeling that the Church is failing in this crisis to furnish any real moral leadership. One hears it said that the utterances of the pulpit are in many instances not easily distinguishable from the opinions expressed in the market-place and the street, and that it would be difficult to make clear wherein the views of the situation taken by the religious press differ from those of secular papers. That the Church has largely abdicated its function as the spiritual guide of the nations is not only asserted by keen observers like M. Romain Rolland and Mr. H. G. Wells ; it is also deeply felt by many who passionately believe that in the Church of Christ is found the only hope for the future. There is therefore an urgent need to inquire, first, what in general is the present attitude of the Church [1] towards the issues raised by the war ; and, secondly, whether there is any distinctively Christian attitude towards those issues for which the Church, because it is the Church of Christ, is bound unreservedly and unmistakably to stand.

II

No one would be disposed to question that the Church has endeavoured loyally and sympathetically to stand by

[1] By the Church is meant, for the purpose of the present discussion, the various organized bodies of those who call themselves Christians. There is of course no means by which the Church in this sense can express its corporate mind. The view of the present attitude of the Church taken in this paper represents only an impression derived from reading and from personal contact with a considerable number of people belonging to different denominations. Every general statement is necessarily subject to many exceptions and qualifications.

the nation in its hour of trial. The nation has been called to suffer as none of us imagined it would ever have to suffer. Alike to the wounded on the battlefield and to the stricken at home, the Church has brought its ministries of comfort and healing. It has taken its share in the relief of distress and in the solution of the moral problems to which the new situation has given rise. To combatants and to non-combatants it has spoken of duty and service, and of the strength for these that comes from Christ.

The Church has, further, declared its sympathy with the cause for which the nation is striving. That it can do so with a good conscience the present writer does not question. He cannot agree with those who take the extreme pacifist position. That view seems to ignore too completely the natural and material conditions in which the spiritual life has to develop. While we rise in revolt against the conditions out of which the war came, if in the fateful first week of August the only alternative to war was national dishonour and disaster, we may as Christians approve the choice which the nation made. And if in the conflict spiritual ideals are involved, and liberties and institutions of value to mankind are at stake, the Church is fulfilling its functions as a moral teacher in seeking to interpret these issues to the people.

Again, for the Christian to withhold his admiration for the heroism and self-sacrifice which the war has evoked would indicate a dullness and indifference to moral values. It is clear from the Gospels that Christ had a special love for simple people who did and dared things. The saying of His which is most frequently recorded is the call to lose one's life in order to find it in a truer and higher life. The Church would be blind to its opportunity if it failed to recognize the good as well as the evil that has found expression in the war,

and to use the occasion to bring home Christ's teaching about the meaning of life.

There is one fact which must continually be in our minds in every discussion of the war and every judgement of the attitude of the Church towards it. The whole fabric of the Empire, the safety of our homes, and the liberties which are dear to us, the privileges which as a nation we hold in trust for others, are resting at this moment on the exposed and battered bodies and dauntless spirits of those who are serving in our army and navy. It is doubtful whether our people, protected by a girdle of sea and by our powerful navy, have yet fully understood what war really means. We are free to consider in peace and quietness what our attitude to war should be only because others are putting their bodies between us and the shells and bayonets of the enemy. This cardinal and humbling truth must never leave us, and must colour every utterance of the Church.

III

But if this were a complete account of the attitude of the Church towards the war, would there be anything peculiar and original in its witness? Faithfulness to obligations, love of liberty, patriotism, self-sacrifice and courage are virtues which find a place in pagan morality. Are there no distinctive truths to which the Church, because it is the Church of Christ, is bound at the present time to bear clear and unequivocal testimony?

(1) The Church by its very nature transcends differences of nationality and race. Its members are united to one another not by natural bonds but by participation in a common Divine life. Sharing in this common life, they are members of one Body. This unity is more real and more fundamental than ties of race or blood or political obligation. The tragedy is that the Church

has failed to express, in the world of actual fact and experience, this essential unity of those who are in Christ. Because of this failure the Church had not the power to avert the present catastrophe.

At this time, above all others, when the real meaning and calamity of the failure of the Church is patent to all, it is incumbent on Christians to return with a new conviction to the foundation principle of the Christian society. 'One is your teacher, and all ye are brethren.' 'We, who are many, are one body in Christ.' It has been admitted that, in consequence of the failure of the Church in the past, it may at this moment be a right thing that, in the service of a cause which Christian men recognize to be binding on them, those who are brethren in Christ should shoot and stab one another. But this awful necessity must compel us to grasp more passionately the unity that is being violated. Now, more than ever, the Church must affirm the truth on which its existence depends. And this it may do in two ways.

It may hold steadily before the minds of Christian people the fact that the unity which binds together those who are in Christ is a more fundamental and more important thing—something more deeply rooted in the heart of reality—than the national antagonisms that are now finding violent expression. They will pass; it remains. As this conviction deepens within us, we shall seek for opportunities to give practical expression to the unity which is fundamental in our consciousness, but which everything around us appears to deny. The help that missionaries of the warring nationalities have been able to give to one another in the mission field is a notable illustration of what is meant.

Again, while the nations are seeking to destroy one another, it is the duty of the Church to hold before the eyes of men the higher conception of nationality that

it derives from its own ideal for human society. The passionate energy of the struggle tends to concentrate attention on the military aim, which is to crush the hostile nation. At no time is there greater need for a voice speaking with the authority of God to remind men that all nations have their part to play in His plan —that all are needed for the building up of the body of Christ. The Church will be false to its own nature and genius, if in this crisis it allows its aims to become identified with an exclusively national cause.

(2) One of the characteristic features of a genuinely Christian experience, in contrast with that of pagan religions, is the place given to repentance. The Christian has seen in the light of the Cross what sin means. There is set before him an infinite ideal, and he always carries about with him a sense of the immeasurable distance between his present attainment and the heights to which he is called. If ever there was a time when, as individuals and as a nation, we should repent of our sins, it is when God's judgements are abroad in the earth. It is to be feared, however, that the conviction that our cause is just has begotten in us a spirit of self-righteousness which is far from Christian, and that we have been more concerned to proclaim that we are not as other men than to examine ourselves and see whether there be any wicked way in us. But when we reflect how imperfect in God's sight have been our recognition and discharge of the responsibilities of Empire, and how deeply our national life at home and our national policy abroad have been tainted by selfishness and materialism, it must appear a miracle of God's mercy that we are fighting just now in a cause which we believe to be righteous. If we are permitted to think that in this war we are being used as an instrument for the advancement of truth, freedom, and righteousness, who are we that we should serve such

a purpose ? The thought may well bring us to our knees. If the view generally taken of the meaning of the war is true, there was never a more searching call to cleanse our hearts and amend our lives.

The evil spirit that has brought about these unspeakable horrors, just because it is a spirit and attitude of mind, is confined by no geographical boundaries. If we search honestly we shall find its poison in our own national life and policy ; if we look deep enough we shall discover it in our own hearts. The Church has not been slow to reprobate the faults of Germany. But the primary concern of the Christian is not with the sins of other people, but with his own sins. If for a little we would let the anger die out of our hearts, and, turning away our eyes from those who, like ourselves, are weak men, the prey of evil passions, fix them on the hateful spirit of pride, unbrotherliness, and lust of power which is making a hell of God's world, there would be more hope for humanity than in any triumph of our arms. The cry of penitence has found expression at this time in the prayers of the Church. But is there any evidence that a deep and radical repentance has become the dominating attitude of our minds ? Is there a passionate resolve to dig down to the roots of all this evil and cast it from us ?

(3) There is nothing in the Christian moral ideal more striking and distinctive than the command to love our enemies. It has frequently been alleged by opponents of Christianity that this is a demand to which frail human nature cannot be expected to rise. But the Christian reply has been that what is impossible to nature is possible by God's grace. If it were necessary to define Christianity in a sentence, we might call it the religion of love. To relegate love to a secondary place is equivalent to dethroning Christ. In fact in the New Testament view it is sheer atheism : for God is love. It is impossible to

maintain that this all-comprehending principle of love is suspended and abrogated in time of war.

Is it not the height of absurdity, it may be asked, to speak at once of fighting people and of loving them? The inconsistency is certainly startling, and if the Christian cannot fight and love at the same time there can be no question which alternative he must choose. Christ demanded an allegiance transcending every other loyalty. But it is possible to hold that in our present unhappy conditions duty requires that we should take our share in opposing the German national will, which we believe to be bad, while at the same time we cherish no hatred in our hearts. What Christian love demands of us is that we should seek every opportunity of showing kindness to individual Germans, and that we should sincerely and from our hearts desire the good of the German people.

When we have brought against the Germans every charge that truth and justice allow us to make against them, we have to make a further assertion which is truer and more fundamental than any of our accusations: it is that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ loves them. In the interests of religion it is far more important to maintain a firm grasp upon that fact than to prove our enemies guilty of any wrongdoing. For if God does not love them, neither can we be sure that He loves us. And if He loves them, we also must love them.

With what clearness and authority has the Church, amid an atmosphere of bitterness and hatred, proclaimed this truth? Many warnings against unthinking hate and unworthy retaliation have come from our soldiers. Can it be said that the utterances of the pulpit and of the religious press and the general temper of Christian people have been calculated to leave an unmistakable impression that those who profess the Christian name prize love above everything else? Yet this is the hall-mark of Christianity.

If in the hour of testing the Church is forgetful of its first principles, can it hope to retain its moral authority over the minds of men ? If the salt has lost its savour, wherewith shall it be salted ? Ought not the whole world to know that Christian people, because they are Christians, unreservedly desire the good of the German people, and are striving for the triumph of love over hate ?

(4) It belongs to essential Christian belief that evil can be effectively overcome only by spiritual means. The Christian desires not to exterminate his enemies but to convert them : his weapon is the irresistible might of truth ; his strength and support, an unwavering trust in God ; his secret of great achievement, prayer. These truths need to be proclaimed with special emphasis in time of war. The mind is apt to be mastered by the might of material things and to form an exaggerated notion of what can be achieved by compulsion. The thought of the nation is concentrated at present on the defeat of Germany, and it is in danger of forgetting how little can be gained by a mere military triumph. A victory on the battle-field may lead to the removal of an obstacle or menace. It may be the means of disciplining and purifying the nation that is defeated. But it is futile as a means of destroying evil. Militarism crushed in Germany may raise its head elsewhere, and the world be no better than it was before. It is of vital importance that this truth should steady all our thinking. For unless the outcome of the war is to substitute better and truer ideas for those which have issued in the present catastrophe, there will be nothing to compensate for the appalling loss. Can the Church render a greater service to the peoples of Europe at the present time than by strengthening men's belief in the supremacy of moral forces ? While the energies of the nations are absorbed in the wrestle of life and death, some people ought to be

devoting earnest thought to the means of bringing about that conversion of mind without which the greatest military victory will profit us nothing. Is it not to this task that the Church, by its own fundamental convictions, is especially called?

(5) We cannot close our eyes to the fact that, terrible as the war is, it has been the occasion of a purification and elevation of the national life. A common purpose has lifted men above themselves. They have found themselves ready to make undreamed-of sacrifices for the sake of a worthy cause. It is the power of war to evoke such efforts that makes men tolerate an evil so hateful. War is nobler than an ease-loving materialism, and men are aware of it. We shall not get rid of war by denouncing it. If it is ever to be abolished, we must oppose to it a pacific ideal that has in it the same strength of purpose, the same call to effort and sacrifice for a great common end, the same music of the march.

The Church has such an ideal. Its conception of society is that it should be a fellowship, a brotherhood. It is true that this conception is, in the first instance, an ideal for the Church—for those who in Christ have been brought into new relations with one another. But it is an ideal which is meant to be put in practice and applied in the everyday life of the world. The Church cannot escape from the obligation to realize its ideal by tacitly assuming, as it has for the most part done, that the actual conditions of the world make such an attempt impossible. The attempt to shape life in accordance with the ideal must be made even if it leads to the cross.

Is not God through this tragedy calling the Church to set itself to realize with a new earnestness its own ideal of brotherhood? This will involve an entire reconstruction of our thinking on many subjects. We need not only individually a change of heart, but also corporately

a great effort to learn how the ideal may be applied to the complex relations of our social, commercial, industrial, political, and international life.[1] The best energy of mind and brain must be thrown into the task of making the Christian conception a real power in the life of the world. Many of the ideas that have been openly or tacitly accepted in the past must be boldly challenged. It will be necessary to convince the conscience of Europe that self-sacrifice and respect for the rights and aspirations of others are the duty of social groups and of nations as well as of individuals. The only condition on which it is possible for the Church, without apostasy to its Lord, to accept the present war as the lesser of two evils is that it should dedicate itself immediately to the discovery of some more adequate way of expressing the will of Christ for society.

The Kingdom of God would then become in an altogether new sense a living reality in the actual world. There would exist on earth a visible society to which men felt a deeper loyalty and a stronger love than they owe to any earthly state, and for which they would gladly make the sacrifices that they now make for a more limited national ideal. The Church would become the true soul of the world's higher life.

(6) In an enfeebled and devastated world the Church is called to keep alive the beacon of hope. The nations will emerge from the war with their powers weakened and their resources depleted. They will be less fitted to solve the great problems of the present century and to accomplish the tasks on which the progress of civilization depends.

[1] 'Is it too much to hope that when we get time to think again about our labour conditions, we shall be able to ask ourselves not how little need this class or group or individual yield, or how much can the other class or group or individual successfully claim, but what is really just as among brothers, what is right in a body corporate, in which the weakness of any one member is the weakness of all?' The Bishop of Oxford in *The War and the Church*, p. 9.

They will find it less easy to co-operate with one another. Will there be sufficient energy for the work of repair? Must the hope of real progress be abandoned for an indefinite time?

The Church is the bearer of a message of life. It was born in a world dying of exhaustion, and brought into it a new regenerating and rejuvenating force. It has often forgotten its own great secret, and has become cold and lifeless. But there have come periods of revival when through it the world has received fresh supplies of moral and spiritual energy. Those supplies are always available, if we would but open our hearts to receive them. For in Christ we have access to God the Father, who is the source of all life, and who will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him.

May not the Church stand upon its watch-tower and boldly bid men look up and raise their heads because their redemption is at hand? How shall we set limits to what the loving God is able to do for this unhappy world? It may be not without purpose that Christian thought has been so much occupied in recent years with the apocalyptic element in the New Testament. The living God is always ready to break into this world and flood it with His Divine energy, if men will only let Him.

The cause of our evils is not in God. It is the Father's good pleasure, as Christ assured us, to give us the Kingdom. The delay and failure are wholly in ourselves. A new world is coming into being, different from anything we have ever dreamed. Shall the Church fail God in this great hour? Or shall it allow itself to become the instrument of accomplishing His purpose of good for the world? It can do so by being wholly true to its character and mission.

This paper has been written to plead that the question of that character and mission should receive fresh

consideration. Much that has been said here on so great a theme is partial, incomplete, it may be, mistaken. Whatever is untrue others with greater knowledge and more spiritual insight will correct. But on this, at least, let us all be resolved : that we will not shut our ears to the call of the solemn hour in which we are living. Some order of love and freedom, of fellowship and brotherhood, is the goal towards which mankind through all its struggles blindly strives. The pledge and earnest of that new order is divinely given to us in the Church of Christ. The anguish of Europe will not have been in vain if in it the Church is born again. And there is no reason why it should not be born again, if in penitent and longing hearts there dawns a new vision of what God meant His Church to be.

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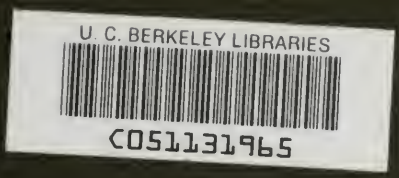

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